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Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO): What Is the Influence on Perceived Perpetrator and Victim Credibility?

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ABSTRACT

Perpetrators of interpersonal violence sometimes use denial, engage in personal attacks on victim credibility, and assume a victimized role (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender; DARVO) to deflect blame. Two new experimental vignette studies were conducted to investigate DARVO. Experiment 1 (316 university students) aimed to assess the effects of a perpetrator's use of DARVO on perceptions of perpetrator and victim credibility, responsibility, and abusiveness. Participants who were exposed to DARVO perceived the victim to be less believable, more responsible for the violence, and more abusive; DARVO also led participants to judge the perpetrator as less abusive and less responsible. Experiment 2 (360 university students) examined whether learning about DARVO could mitigate its effects on individuals' perceptions of perpetrators and victims. Results from Experiment 2 indicate that DARVO-educated participants perceived the victim as less abusive and more believable, and rated the perpetrator as less believable. These experiments show DARVO effectively reinforces the distrust of victims' narratives, but education can reduce some of its power. We suggest that more research and education about this perpetrator tactic is needed to combat its anti-victim effects.

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DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender roles) describes how perpetrators of interpersonal violence deflect blame and responsibility when confronted for their abusive behavior (Freyd, 1997). When used, a perpetrator denies or minimizes the harms of any wrongdoing, attacks the victim's credibility, and reverses victim and offender roles such that the perpetrator assumes a victimized position and declares the victim to be the true perpetrator. To date, there is very little research investigating DARVO. One empirical study examining the prevalence of DARVO during victim-perpetrator confrontations revealed that it is a commonly-used response by perpetrators (Harsey et al., 2017). This research also discovered a relationship between the perpetrators' use of DARVO and victims' feelings of self-blame: the more

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DARVO that the perpetrator used during the confrontation, the more victims reported feeling blameworthy for the wrongdoing.

Perpetrator tactics

Previous research has described tactics that perpetrators might use to temper reactions to their wrongdoings. "Outrage management" is a term that represents a set of techniques employed by perpetrators that mitigate observers' negative evaluations of both perpetrators and their objectionable behaviors (McDonald et al., 2010). The perpetrator, in order to avoid facing consequences, therefore tries to mollify the potential backlash when held accountable for their actions. McDonald et al. (2010) noted that such outrage management techniques include casting doubt onto the credibility of the victim and denying the victims' versions of events or reframing them so that they appear more innocuous. This closely mirrors the denial and personal attacks described by DARVO. Similarly, both outrage management and DARVO represent ways in which perpetrators actively try to explain away and manipulate bystanders' understanding of abusive events.

Researchers have also proposed that perpetrators will engage in one of two strategies in order to deflect blame for wrongdoing: either admit to committing the wrongdoing but emphasize previous good behavior (play the hero), or highlight some past suffering (play the victim) (Gray & Wegner, 2011). In a series of experimental studies, Gray and Wegner examined the impact of these two roles on observers and discovered that playing the victim – but not playing the hero – effectively decreases the amount of blame ascribed to the perpetrator.

Although research on DARVO as a perpetrator tactic is limited, previous studies have examined the components of DARVO individually. For example, the literature on perpetrators describes how denial, minimization, and victim-blaming are commonly expressed by individuals who have committed interpersonal violence, including sexual assault and intimate partner violence (Henning et al., 2005; Lila et al., 2008; Scott & Straus, 2007). Studies that have conducted interviews with perpetrators of intimate partner violence have found that the abusers who minimized the severity of the abuse were also likely to implicate the victim as the instigator of the violence (Dutton, 1986; Lila et al., 2008). Recent research on DARVO confirms that the three parts of DARVO – denial, attacking the victim, and reversal of victim and offender – are indeed used together when individuals are confronted about a wrongdoing they committed. In a survey of 138 undergraduates who had confronted a perpetrator over a wrongdoing, nearly 72% of participants reported that the perpetrator simultaneously used denial, personal attacks, and attempted to reverse victim and offender roles (Harsey et al., 2017). These results suggest that perpetrators tend to employ DARVO as opposed to using a singular strategy (such as denial alone) to offset blame.

Perceptions of victims and perpetrators

For those who have committed abusive acts, the ability to influence how others perceive them and their victims is indispensable. Convincing bystanders that no abusive behavior took place (or that if something did occur it was not harmful) and that the victim is untrustworthy gives the perpetrator a clear advantage in both social networks and the legal system. If successful, the perpetrator can avoid blame and thereby avoid disadvantageous outcomes. The victim's account is doubted and ultimately disregarded in favor of the perpetrator's narrative.

Perceptions of victims and perpetrators can indeed be manipulated, as indicated by experimental research that has identified numerous factors that influence observers' attributions of blame, credibility, and responsibility. Characteristics such as victim and perpetrator gender (Stewart et al., 2012; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), age (Bottoms et al., 2014), and race (George & Martinez, 2002) impact observers' perceptions of victims and perpetrators. Research on how behavior affects observers' perceptions finds that victims' consumption of intoxicants (Angelone et al., 2016), lack of resistance during an assault (Angelone et al., 2015), and flat emotional expression (Ask, 2010) reduce victim credibility. Research examining perpetrators' behavior in the context of blame attribution is relatively sparse and focuses on intoxication, which generally has an exonerating effect for perpetrators (Cameron & Stritzke, 2003; Stormo et al., 1997).

Studies investigating perceptions of victims and perpetrators seem to overlook perhaps one of the more straightforward ways such perceptions might be manipulated: through perpetrators' response to the abuse. DARVO provides a useful framework through which the impact of perpetrators' statements about their wrongdoing can be experimentally examined.

Some past research has used perpetrators' statements as stimuli for experiments; sometimes, these statements contain denial but were not manipulated to examine how the denial affects observes' perceptions (Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011; O'Donohue & O'Hare, 1997). Other studies have manipulated written descriptions of the perpetrator's emotional display in vignettes, finding that a perpetrator who expressed sadness was rated less harshly than a perpetrator who showed more neutral emotions (Robinson et al., 1994; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998). However, the actual words said by the perpetrator – the statements themselves – were not varied.

The present study

One goal of the present study is to therefore assess the extent to which a perpetrator's use of DARVO influences observers' attributions of victim and perpetrator credibility, responsibility, and abusiveness. Experiment 1 used a 2×2 independent measures experimental design that varied perpetrator/victim gender and perpetrator's DARVO use in a series of vignettes describing an incident of

intimate partner violence. Since the proposed aim of DARVO is to excuse the actions of the perpetrator and implicate the victim as the wrongdoer (Freyd, 1997), we hypothesized that participants who read the perpetrator statement characterized by DARVO would rate the perpetrator as being less abusive, less responsible for the abuse, and as more credible than the perpetrator who did not use DARVO. Further, we predicted that the perpetrator's use of DARVO would also lead participants to rate the victim as more abusive, more responsible for the abuse, and as less credible. By varying the gender of the perpetrator and victim pairs, we sought out to further explore the relationships between gender and DARVO.

Another aim of the study is to determine whether learning about DARVO can alter its possible impact on perceptions of victims and perpetrators. More specifically, we were interested in investigating the extent to which educating individuals about this perpetrator tactic can minimize its hypothesized influence. To examine this question, Experiment 2 was conducted using a two-condition independent measures experiment. Both conditions contained the same vignette regarding an instance of sexual assault, which included a statement from the victim and DARVO-identified statement from the perpetrator. A general description of DARVO was included in one of the conditions. We hypothesized that, compared to individuals who did not read about DARVO, those who read the DARVO description would rate the perpetrator as less believable, more abusive, and more responsible. Similarly, we predicted that receiving a brief DARVO education would lead individuals to perceive the victim to be more believable, less abusive, and less responsible. Experiment 2 also included additional dependent variables measuring whether participants believed the perpetrator and victim should be punished for their actions.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Participants were 316 undergraduate students from a large, public Northwestern university (215 women and 101 men) ranging in age from 18 to 49-years-old (M_{Age} = 20.71, SD_{Age} = 3.77). Consistent with the demographics of the university, a majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (69.3%) while smaller numbers of those who completed the study identified as Asian (17.4%), "Other" (8.9%), and African American (1.3%). Five participants indicated they were Native American or Pacific Islander, while an additional five participants elected to not disclose their racial identity.

Materials

The study was comprised of a set of vignettes followed by six questions regarding participants' perceptions of the characters described in the vignettes.

Each vignette described an incident of interpersonal violence between dating partners recounted as a first-person narrative from either the victim or perpetrator's perspective. Before reading the victim and perpetrator's accounts of the incident, participants were provided with a brief description that clearly stated that the perpetrator acted violently toward the victim and that the victim was left with visible bruising the day following the attack. Half of the participants read vignettes in which a female was the victim of a male's abuse while the other half read vignettes describing an incidence of violence in which a female character victimized a male.

After reading the brief description, participants then read two vignettes, with one describing the victim's point of view and a second containing the perpetrator's narrative. Across all four conditions, the victim's narrative was identical, with the exception of the gender of the victim and perpetrator. The perpetrator's narrative varied according to the condition: in half of the conditions, the perpetrator used DARVO tactics in order to deflect blame and responsibility for the abuse. In the other, non-DARVO conditions, the perpetrator's narrative more closely approximated the victim's version of events; the perpetrator in these conditions also took responsibility for the abuse and expressed remorse.

Six questions followed the victim and perpetrator vignettes. Half of the questions pertained to the perceived qualities of the victim, while the remaining three questions regarded the perceived qualities of the perpetrator. These qualities are believability, responsibility for the incident of interpersonal violence, and abusiveness. The questions are: (1) *"How believable do you think* [the victim's] *side of the story is?,"* (2) *"How responsible do you think* [the victim] *is for what happened?,"* (3) *"How abusive do you think* [the victim's] *behavior is?,"* (4) *"How believable do you think* [perpetrator's] *side of the story is?"* (5) "*How responsible do you think* [the perpetrator] *is for what happened?,"* (6) *"How abusive do you think* [the perpetrator's] *behavior is?"* Participants responded to each of the questions on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3. For example, participants could indicate whether they thought the victim's behavior was *0 – Not at all, abusive, 1 – Not very abusive, 2 – Somewhat abusive*, or *3 – Very abusive.*

Procedure

This study was administered online to participants as part of a larger department-wide survey consisting of a battery of brief measures from psychology researchers at the university. This general survey has approval by the university's institutional review board and takes participants no longer than one hour to complete. To participate in this survey, students accessed the university's research study sign-up webpage and elected to take part in an online survey for course credit – no information about the content of the measures contained within the survey was provided as to prevent self-selection.

Participants in this study were randomly assigned to one of four vignette conditions (2x2 of gender by perpetrator DARVO use): (1) male victim, female perpetrator who uses DARVO, (2) female victim, male perpetrator who uses DARVO, (3) male victim, female perpetrator who does not use DARVO (instead, accepts responsibility and is remorseful), (4) female victim, male perpetrator who does not use DARVO. In each condition, the victim's vignette was positioned before the perpetrator's, with each vignette directly followed by questions regarding the perceived believability, responsibility, and abusiveness of the character (either the victim or perpetrator) narrating the vignette. A total of 162 participants were randomly assigned to the DARVO conditions (87 in the male victim condition, and 75 in the female victim condition), and an additional 154 completed the non-DARVO conditions (81 in the male victim condition, and 73 in the female victim condition).

Results

DARVO vs. non-DARVO

A one-way MANOVA revealed an overall significant effect of DARVO on the dependent variables, $F(1, 314) = 25.80$, $p < .001$. Tests of between-subjects effects revealed that participants who read perpetrator accounts characterized by DARVO rated victims as more responsible for the abuse ($F(1, 314) = 13.84$, $p < .001$) and their actions as more abusive ($F(1, 314) = 13.68$, $p < .001$) compared to those who read the perpetrator vignettes that did not contain DARVO. Similarly, participants exposed to the perpetrator's DARVO use perceived the perpetrator as less responsible for the abuse ($F(1, 314) = 5.63$, $p = .018$) and as less abusive ($F(1, 314) = 26.43$, $p < .001$). When comparing believability between the DARVO and non-DARVO conditions, we discovered that those in the DARVO condition rated both the victim ($F(1, 314) = 25.91$, $p < .001$) and the perpetrator as less believable ($F(1, 314) = 93.85$, $p < .001$) See Figure 1 for an illustration of these findings.

Perpetrator and victim gender

A MANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of perpetrator and victim gender on individuals' perceptions, which produced a significant test, $F(1, 314) = 5.48$, $p < .001$. Out of the six dependent variables, four were found to produce statistically significant differences in this comparison: in contrast to the male victim, the female victim (victimized by a male perpetrator) was rated as being less responsible for the abuse ($F(1, 314) = 19.89$, $p < .001$). The female perpetrator was viewed as slightly more believable ($F(1, 314) = 2.45$, $p = .047$), less responsible ($F(1, 314) = 2.79$, $p = .033$), and as less abusive ($F(1, 314) = 5.07$, $p = .005$). Female and male victims were not rated differently in terms of believability and abusiveness.

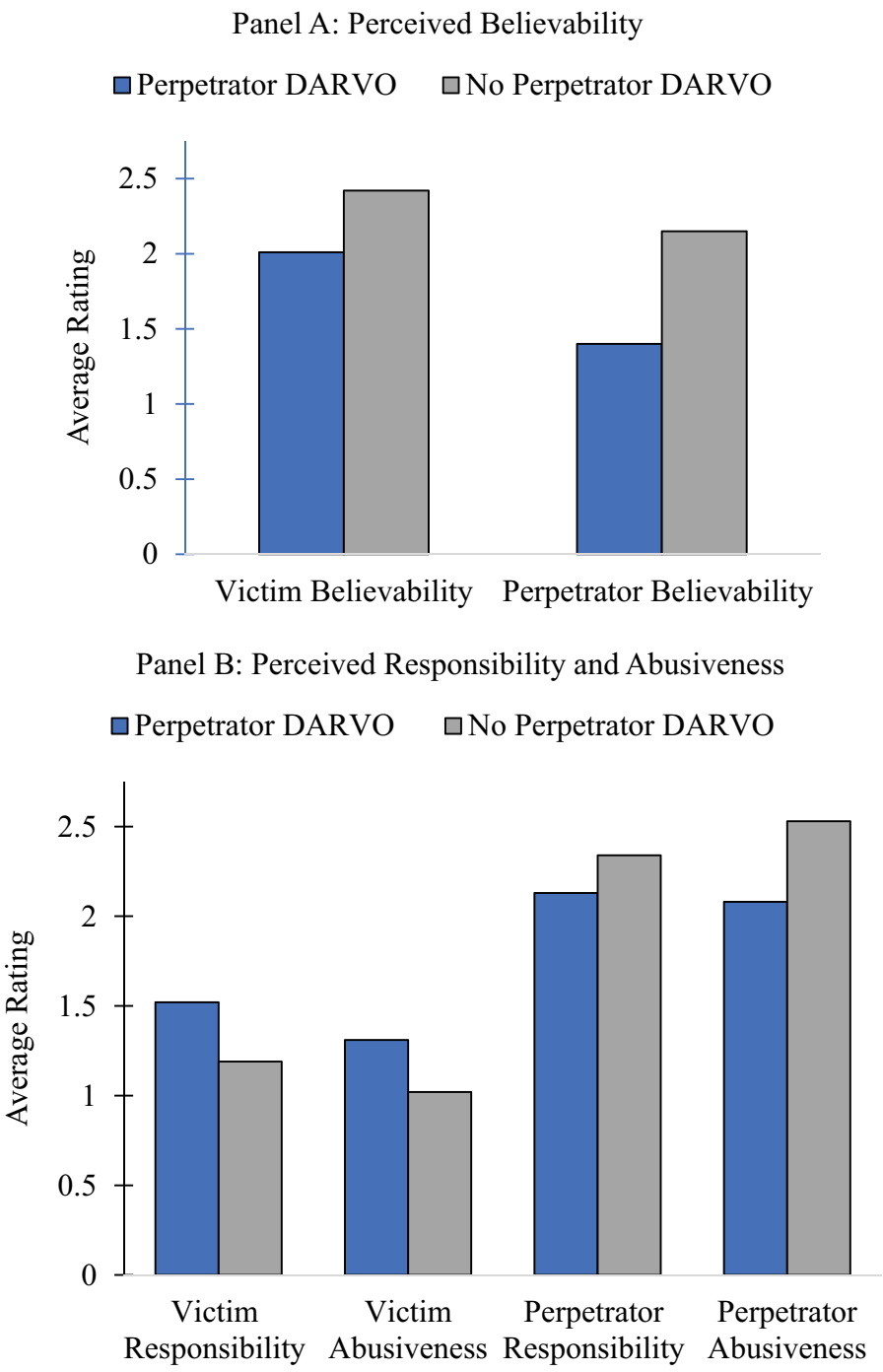

Figure 1. Bar graphs for Experiment 1 containing mean ratings for victim and perpetrator believability (Panel A, favorable evaluations), responsibility, and abusiveness (Panel B, unfavorable evaluations) by condition.

Participant gender

A MANOVA resulted in a significant effect of participant gender on perceptions of the victim and perpetrator, $F(1, 314) = 2.64$, $p = .016$. Tests of between-subjects effects revealed that women, compared to men, rated victims as more believable ($F(1, 314) = 4.60$, $p = .004$), less responsible for the abuse ($F(1, 314) = 5.39$, $p = .004$), and viewed the vignette perpetrators as more abusive ($F(1, 314) = 4.74$, $p = .006$). There were no differences between men and women's ratings for victim abusiveness, perpetrator believability, and perpetrator responsibility.

Interactions between DARVO, victim/perpetrator gender, and participant gender

When testing for the two-way interactions between DARVO condition and vignette victim/perpetrator gender, only victim believability resulted in a significant interaction ($F(1, 312) = 6.30$, $p = .013$). Male victims were rated as less believable in the DARVO condition ($M = 1.90$, $SE = .648$) compared to the No DARVO condition ($M = 2.49$, $SE = .691$), $F(1, 312) = 29.72$, $p < .001$. This difference was not found for the female victims in the DARVO ($M = 2.13$, $SE = .082$) and No DARVO ($M = 2.33$, $SE = .083$) conditions, $F(1, 312) = 2.81$, $p = .095$.

Neither the interactions between victim/perpetrator gender and participant gender nor between DARVO and participant gender were found to be statistically significant for any of the dependent variables. An examination of the three-way interactions between DARVO, victim/perpetrator gender, and participant gender resulted in one marginally significant interaction for perpetrator believability ($F(1, 308) = 3.88$, $p = .050$). Further investigation of this three-way interaction revealed that, for men, the female perpetrator was rated as less believable when using DARVO ($M = 1.43$, $SE = .113$) compared to when she did not use DARVO ($M = 2.19$, $SE = .131$), $F(1, 97) = 19.49$, $p < .001$. The believability of male perpetrators between the DARVO (1.45, .149) and No DARVO conditions ($M = 1.75$, $SE = .149$) did not differ amongst male participants, $F(1, 97) = 2.02$, $p = .159$. However, women rated both female and male perpetrators as less believable in the when DARVO was used. More specifically, women gave female perpetrators lower believability scores in the DARVO condition ($M = 1.52$, $SE = .096$) than in the No DARVO condition ($M = 2.26$, $SE = .093$), $F(1, 211) = 30.25$, $p < .001$; similarly, women also gave male perpetrators lower believability scores in the DARVO condition ($M = 1.24$, $SE = .093$) than in the No DARVO condition ($M = 2.17$, $SE = .095$), $F(2, 211) = 49.22$, $p < .001$.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants

A total of 360 undergraduate students took part in Experiment 2. Consistent with the participant demographics in Experiment 1, the majority were women

(70%), identified as Caucasian (59.2%), heterosexual (87.2%), and on average were 19.66 years old (SD_{Age} = 2.28). Three participants indicated their gender identity as either nonbinary or questioning; seven participants identified as lesbian or gay, 34 identified as bisexual, and five indicated they were asexual or "other" (e.g., pansexual). Among the participants who did not identify as Caucasian, 53 were East Asian, 23 were Latinx or Chicanx, 20 were biracial or multiracial, 16 were Southeast Asian, 13 were Black/African American, 7 were Pacific Islander, and 3 identified as Middle Eastern or North African. Eleven participants reported their racial identity as "other," and one participant opted to not report their racial identity.

Materials

The vignettes used in this study were comprised of two fictional, first-person narratives describing a sexual assault from a female victim (Sophia) and male perpetrator's (Jacob) perspective. Before reading the statements, participants were provided with the following information: "The following are statements about a sexual assault that occurred at a party. Jacob is accused of sexually assaulting Sophia." Sophia's statement included a description of the assault by Jacob, which included being forcibly kissed and grabbed without her consent. Jacob's statement did not admit to the assault but instead employed DARVO; his version of events denied committing any assault, claimed Sophia had too much to drink and fabricated the assault to protect her reputation, and that his own reputation had been damaged by her accusation. After reading the statements from Sophia and Jacob, participants responded to the same set of dependent variables included in Experiment 1: victim and perpetrator believability, responsibility, and abusiveness. Participants responded to these questions on the 4-point Likert scale described in Experiment 1.

Two additional items were included in Experiment 2 that assessed participants' beliefs about victim and perpetrator punishment. Participants responded to the questions, *"Do you think Sophia should be disciplined or punished for her actions?"* and *"Do you think Jacob should be disciplined or punished for his actions"* with either "*Yes*," "*No*," or "*Not Sure*." The experimental condition contained a description of DARVO that accompanied the statements from Sophia and Jacob. The description included in this condition is as follows:

> DARVO stands for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. It describes how some people may react when they are accused of or held responsible for bad behavior. People may use DARVO to deflect blame and responsibility for the wrongdoing. Deny: the person will deny that they did anything wrong. Sometimes they will acknowledge something happened, but that whatever happened wasn't that bad and that it didn't cause any harm. Attack: some people will attack the credibility of their accusers, making it seem like the accusers are untrustworthy and should therefore not be believed. People may say that their accusers are liars, mentally ill, or have ulterior motives. Reverse Victim

and Offender: finally, some people will try to convince others that they are the "true" victim, and that their accuser is actually the guilty one.

After learning about DARVO, participants were asked if they had ever experienced someone using DARVO on them or on someone they knew and responded with "*Yes*," "*No*," or "*Not Sure*." Additionally, using the same response scale, participants indicated whether they believed Sophia and Jacob used DARVO in their narratives. The participants who did not read the DARVO description did not respond to these questions about DARVO.

Procedure

The procedures for this experiment were largely identical to those used in Experiment 1; unlike Experiment 1, however, participants in Experiment 2 were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: perpetrator and victim statements only (control condition), or the same statements plus the DARVO description (experimental condition). There were 241 individuals in the experimental condition and 119 in the control condition. As with Experiment 1, participants did not know about the content of the study at the time of sign-up to minimize self-selection.

Results

DARVO items

Among the participants who read the description of DARVO, 56.9% ($N = 136$) reported that they had experienced someone using DARVO on them or on someone they know. An additional 45 (19%) participants were "Not Sure" if they had experienced DARVO in this way, while the remaining 58 participants (24.1%) responded that they had not experienced DARVO. Most participants in this condition (73.9%) judged Jacob, the perpetrator, to have used DARVO in his statement. In contrast, only 14.9% believed that the victim had used DARVO in her statement. When judging both Jacob and Sophia's statements, participants expressed a fair amount of uncertainty: 21.2% of individuals reported being unsure if Sophia had used DARVO and 16.2% were unsure if Jacob had used DARVO. The other participants in this condition indicated that the victim (64%) and the perpetrator (10%) did not use DARVO.

Gender

As in Experiment 1, we found significant differences in how men and women perceived the perpetrator and victim. Women generally found the victim to be more believable ($F(1, 352) = 30.74$, $p < .001$), less responsible ($F(1, 352) = 9.35$, $p = .002$), and less abusive ($F(1, 352) = 7.20$, $p = .008$). Men rated the perpetrator as more believable ($F(1, 352) = 4.64$, $p = .032$) and less abusive ($F(1, 352) = 4.43$, $p = .036$. We did not find a difference between men and

women in their perceptions of perpetrator responsibility. Table 1 contains the means for this set of analyses.

When looking at gender differences in victim and perpetrator punishment beliefs, we found that 13.6% men but only 5.2% of women endorsed punishment for the victim; a chi-squared test indicated that this difference in proportions was significant, χ^2 (1, N = 360) = 7.50, p = .006. However, we did not find a significant association between gender and perpetrator punishment, χ^2 (2, N = 359) = 5.45, p = .07.

DARVO education vs. no education

A MANOVA was conducted to compare responses on the six dependent variables regarding perceptions of the victim and perpetrator between conditions. This omnibus resulted in significance (F(1, 347) = 3.82, p = .001), which prompted individual F-tests to be conducted for each of the dependent variables. Results of these tests revealed a significant difference between means for perpetrator believability (F(1, 347) = 18.75, p < .001), victim abusiveness (F(1, 347) = 8.47, p = .004), and victim believability (F(1, 347) = 6.31, p = .012). More specifically, we found that DARVO-educated individuals rated the perpetrator as less believable and more abusive. Participants who read about DARVO also rated the victim as less abusive and more believable. Perpetrator responsibility (F(1, 347) = 2.59, p = .11) and victim responsibility (F(1, 347) = 3.55, p = .06) produced insignificant results. Figure 2 below illustrates the significant results of this analysis.

Victim and perpetrator punishment

Pearson chi-squares tests were computed for the two questions regarding victim and perpetrator punishment. The tests showed that responses for victim punishment (χ^2 (2, N = 360) = 6.59, p = .037) and perpetrator punishment (χ^2 (2, N = 359) = 6.86, p = .032) differed between the two conditions. More specifically, 58% of participants in the DARVO education condition believed the perpetrator should be punished or disciplined, whereas a smaller proportion (43.7%) of individuals who did not read about DARVO agreed with this assessment, χ^2 (1, N = 360) = 6.53, p = .01. Tests also revealed that fewer individuals in the DARVO explanation condition (5.4%) endorsed punishment for the victim compared to participants in the control condition (12.6%) (χ^2 (1, N = 360) = 5.74, p = .02.

Discussion

DARVO describes how perpetrators of interpersonal violence deny their abusive actions, attack the credibility of their victims, and reverse victim and offender roles such that the victim is portrayed as the true agent of abuse. The aim of this study was to investigate how perpetrators' use of DARVO

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, significance levels, and partial eta-squared effect sizes for tests of between-subjects effects for Experiment 1 and Experiment 2.

Experiment 1	Perpetrator DARVO	No Perpetrator DARVO		Female Participants	Male Participants		Female Victim, Male Perpetrator	Male Victim, Female Perpetrator	
Victim	*M*(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)	η_p^2	*M*(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)	η_p^2	*M*(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)	η_p^2
Believability	2.01(.70)	2.42(.73)***	.076	2.29(.72)	2.03(.77)**	.026	2.23(.76)	2.18(.73)	–
Responsibility	1.52(.78)	1.19(.79)***	.042	1.27(.80)	1.55(.78)**	.027	1.16(.85)	1.55(.72)***	.060
Abusiveness	1.31(.64)	1.02(.75)***	.042	1.13(.68)	1.24(.76)	–	1.18(.73)	1.16(.70)	–
Perpetrator									
Believability	1.40(.62)	2.15(.76)***	.230	1.80(.82)	1.69(.73)	–	1.67(.83)	1.85(.74)*	.013
Responsibility	2.13(.76)	2.34(.80)*	.018	2.28(.77)	2.13(.81)	–	2.33(.79)	2.14(.77)*	.014
Abusiveness	2.08(.80)	2.53(.73)***	.078	2.38(.76)	2.12(.85)**	.023	2.43(.79)	2.18(.79)**	.025
Experiment 2	No DARVO Education	DARVO Education		Female Participants	Male Participants		–	–	–
Victim	*M*(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)	η_p^2	*M*(*SD*)	*M*(*SD*)	η_p^2	–	–	–
Believability	3.30(.72)	3.49(.63)*	.018	3.55(.59)	3.14(.74)***	.08	–	–	–
Responsibility	2.07(.91)	1.88(.86)	–	1.85(.88)	2.15(.84)**	.026	–	–	–
Abusiveness	1.83(.88)	1.57(.78)*	.023	1.58(.78)	1.85(.88)**	.020	–	–	–
Perpetrator							–	–	–
Believability	2.64(.67)	2.29(.75)**	.051	2.35(.74)	2.53(.74)*	.013	–	–	–
Responsibility	3.18(.74)	3.31(.78)	–	3.29(.76)	3.19(.76)	–	–	–	–
Abusiveness	2.87(.79)	3.07(.81)*	.014	3.06(.78)	2.88(.86)*	.012	–	–	–

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

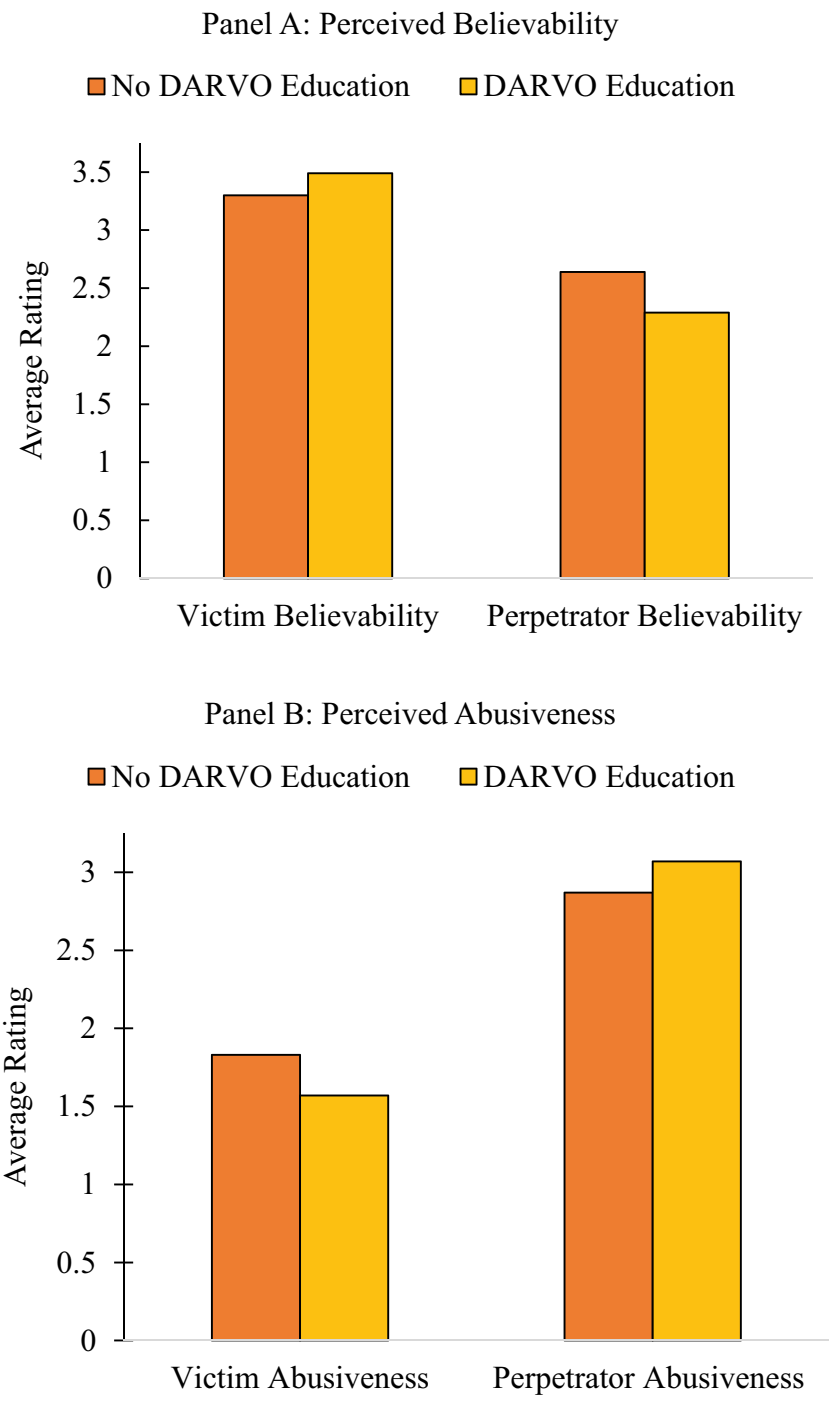

Figure 2. Bar graphs for Experiment 2 containing mean ratings for victim and perpetrator believability (Panel A, favorable evaluation) and abusiveness (Panel B, unfavorable evaluations) by condition.

influences perceptions of victims and perpetrators, and whether learning about DARVO could reduce these influences. The results of our experiment revealed that a perpetrator's use of DARVO does influence observers' perceptions, leading individuals to view victims as more responsible for the abuse perpetrated against them and as more abusive. Conversely, DARVO causes perpetrators to be seen as less responsible for the abuse they committed and as less abusive in general. We found that some of these effects, however, can be mitigated when the observer has some knowledge of DARVO.

These findings confirm our predictions that exposure to a perpetrator's use of DARVO measurably displaces at least some of the blame for the abusive behavior from the perpetrator to the victim. This fulfills a major aim of DARVO, one in which the perception of victims as blameless targets of abuse is suppressed in favor of the belief that victims play a culpable role in their victimization. However, the results did not support our hypothesis in regard to perpetrator believability: instead of supporting the prediction that DARVO would increase perpetrator believability, analyses revealed that DARVO decreases the extent to which perpetrators are viewed as believable. In other words, although DARVO appears to benefit perpetrators and harm victims on attributions of responsibility and abusiveness, DARVO appears to make both victims and perpetrators less believable.

This result suggests that DARVO comes at some cost to its users as it diminishes perpetrator believability, which may be due to its socially antagonistic nature. Relational aggression describes verbal and behavioral actions that harm others by targeting a victim's social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It is associated with higher social status and perceived popularity (Rose et al., 2004), but those who employ it are generally disliked by their peers due to its antisocial characteristics (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). DARVO itself could likely be considered a form of relational aggression, given that it too is characterized by antisocial elements and functions to preserve one's social standing. The data presented in this study suggest that DARVO, like relational aggression, provides perpetrators with some social advantage (i.e., a reduction in negative attributions), yet simultaneously penalizes those who use it by reducing perceived credibility. As noted by Cillessen and Mayeux (2004), the penalties associated with relational aggression do not appear to outweigh its benefits; in other words, despite its drawbacks, those who engage in such aggression still are able to obtain overall favorable outcomes for themselves. It is possible, then, that DARVO operates in a very similar way for perpetrators.

DARVO's effect on perceptions of victim believability has clear implications in the legal system. In the absence of physical evidence, a victim's perceived credibility is considered by investigators to be one of the most important factors in legal proceedings of sexual assault cases (Campbell et al., 2015) and has long been the target of defense lawyers (Zydervelt et al., 2017).

Moreover, characteristics that impact sexual assault victim credibility are linked with law enforcements' judgment of a rape report's legitimacy. A study examining sexual assault cases reported to the LAPD identified that reports from victims who had a history of mental health issues were ten times more likely to be declared unfounded, while reports from victims whose moral character was called into question were three times more likely to be judged to be unfounded (Spohn et al., 2014). Due to its capacity to diminish victim credibility and implicate the victim as being abusive and at least partially responsible for their victimization, it is possible that DARVO discourages victims from speaking about abuse and provides perpetrators with an advantage in legal settings.

The current study also revealed that, in addition to increasing negative perceptions of victim responsibility and abusiveness, DARVO causes observers to evaluate perpetrators less harshly. By leading observers to see a perpetrator as less abusive and as bearing a smaller portion of responsibility for their harmful actions, DARVO helps deflect some of the blame away from the perpetrator. This illusion of shared responsibility is associated with a willingness to treat a perpetrator more leniently. In a study examining the effect of exculpatory writing styles on perceptions of male perpetrators of domestic violence (Lamb & Keon, 1995), researchers found that participants who read newspaper articles implicating a shared responsibility for the abuse assigned more lenient punishments to the perpetrator.

Some of the DARVO effects discovered in the first experiment were found to be reduced by learning about this perpetrator tactic. Moreover, having some knowledge about this tactic produced more pro-victim assessments: compared to those who made victim and perpetrator judgments without reading about DARVO, a smaller proportion of individuals who received information about DARVO agreed that the victim should be punished. DARVO-educated individuals were also more likely to agree that the perpetrator should be punished. Although this educational intervention in Experiment 2 was very brief, it still produced measurable effects – this perhaps suggests that a more extensive educational intervention, such as an interactive activity with extensive examples, would result in additional inoculation against DARVO.

Gender played a meaningful role in perpetrator and victim ratings in the current study. Compared to the female participants, men rated the victim as less believable, more abusive, and more responsible for the abuse. The men in this study also rated the perpetrator as less abusive and as more believable. Moreover, in Experiment 2, men were more likely to endorse punishment for the victim. These are unsurprising findings given that past research reliably shows that men are more likely to exhibit more negative views of victims and less punitive views of perpetrators (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014).

Regarding the perpetrator and victim gender in the vignettes from Experiment 1, we found that the male victim was rated as overall more responsible for the abuse and that the male perpetrator was rated as less believable, more responsible, and more abusive; further, we found an interaction effect suggesting that the male victim's believability is disproportionately affected by DARVO. In general, male-perpetrated physical violence against women is considered to be more serious than female-perpetrated violence against a man (Williams et al., 2012). This perception has been attributed to the difference in men and women's physical size. For example, individuals asked to evaluate instances of domestic violence take into consideration how men's larger and stronger bodies have the potential to cause more physical harm (Hamby & Jackson, 2010). While women are more likely to be targets of domestic violence and sustain injuries from their partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), it is critical that men who are physically abused by women are believed and regarded as legitimate victims.

By experimentally manipulating a perpetrator's use of DARVO through vignettes, we can draw causal conclusions regarding the effect of DARVO on victim and perpetrator believability, responsibility, and abusiveness. We can further conclude that having a rudimentary understanding of DARVO can produce more favorable views of victims. The predictions of this study were largely supported by analyses. This study therefore provides proof-of-concept evidence that DARVO can be effective when used by a perpetrator and that some of its effects can be mitigated by a brief DARVO education.

Limitations

While the experimental methodology offers value in determining causality, the present study had several limitations. The sample used in this study was fairly homogeneous in terms of age and race, with all participants recruited from a university and the majority of respondents identifying as Caucasian. Although this particular sample was typical of the students attending the university where this research was conducted, future studies on DARVO should include samples that are representative of communities more diverse in education level, age, and racial identity.

We cannot conclude much about real-world effect sizes from this research given the experimental interventions in both experiments were minimal compared to the typical deployment and potential education of DARVO in the real world. For instance, it is likely that the effectiveness of DARVO was diminished in our study by the written presentation of this tactic. DARVO may produce a more profound impact when delivered by, for example, a powerful man with a lot of self-confidence giving an oral presentation.

A fair amount of research has identified various participant attitudes and beliefs that influence individuals' perceptions of perpetrators and victims,

including participants' rape myth acceptance and gender ideology (Angelone et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2012), sexist beliefs (Abrams et al., 2003), and belief in a just world (Stromwall et al., 2014). While the present study did not include such attitudinal variables, it is possible that such participant characteristics would interact with the effects of DARVO. Future research experimentally examining DARVO would benefit from including measures of participant attitudes and beliefs.

There are many aspects of DARVO that have yet to be investigated. This includes DARVO as it relates to social class, race, sexuality, and other identities. In the current study, the vignette characters are presumably heterosexual and may also perhaps be as perceived, by default, as White. Additional research on DARVO should examine its effects in the context of nonwhite, non-heterosexual victims and perpetrators of varying social class. Moreover, future studies should investigate DARVO and its association with perpetrator guilt. Previous research confirms that perpetrators sometimes use DARVO on the individuals they have victimized (Harsey et al., 2017), but it is not clear whether DARVO is used primarily by those guilty of committing wrongdoing or if it is also regularly employed by individuals who are innocent. Future research should determine the relationship between DARVO use and culpability.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that a perpetrator's use of denial, attacks, and reversal of victim and offender roles impacts individuals' judgments of victims and perpetrators. DARVO foments skepticism of victims' trustworthiness and blamelessness and encourages observers to see perpetrators as less harmful and as playing a smaller role in the abuse they commit. Although it also casts doubt on perpetrators' narratives, this manipulation tactic targets and damages the integrity of victims. DARVO, because it is employed in a society steeped in commonly-believed myths about interpersonal violence, expertly plays into and exacerbates the preexisting doubts surrounding the innocence of victims and culpability of perpetrators. It is critical to recognize this perpetrator tactic and provide education about its purpose and effects. By identifying and calling out DARVO when it occurs, we may be able to effectively interrupt perpetrators' attempts to discredit and silence their victims.

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